

Lessons of October: The political crisis within the Bolshevik Party on the eve of the seizure of power

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Before beginning: I will use the old-style calendar for my lecture, because these dates are referenced in some of the comments of those involved and because, as the title of the lecture suggests, the Bolsheviks had to make a revolution before they could change the date.

As the first lecture in this series, Comrade David North chose as his title, “Why study the Russian Revolution?”

In a list of 10 points answering this question, North replied in reason nine:

The Bolsheviks provided the working class with an example of what a genuine revolutionary party is, and the irreplaceable role of such a party in securing the victory of the socialist revolution. A careful study of the revolutionary process in 1917 leaves no doubt that the presence of the Bolshevik Party, with Lenin and Trotsky in its leadership, was decisive in securing the victory of the socialist revolution. [1]

Examining the crisis that erupted in the Bolshevik Party on the eve of the October insurrection puts the vital question of the irreplaceable role of the revolutionary party under the microscope, and enables us to more fully understand the tasks faced by our party and its cadre today.

Since returning to Russia in April, the essential work of Lenin had been to oppose every attempt to subordinate the Bolshevik party to acting as the left wing of a national democratic revolution—with the role of pressuring the bourgeoisie to ensure its completion.

This was the explicit standpoint of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs) and continued to be the conception animating the right wing of the Bolsheviks, led by Zinoviev and Kamenev—and, in a more concealed and vacillating form, by Stalin—long after the discussions on Lenin’s April Theses.

Lenin was for an irreconcilable struggle against any support for Russia’s continued participation in the imperialist war, the capture of the Soviet majority, the overthrow of the Provisional Government, the seizure of power by the Soviets and the carrying through of a socialist revolution in Russia, as part of a European and world socialist revolution. In September and October, he had to convince his party’s leadership that the time was ripe for the seizure of power.

In his lecture, Comrade Barry Grey noted how Lenin had urged the party to abandon the slogan “All Power to the Soviets” in favour of an explicit insistence that the party place itself at the head of an insurrection, carried out in its own name and under its authority.

He did so in response to the role played by the SR and Menshevik-dominated soviets in July, in mobilising the soldiers to crush

both the uprising and the Bolsheviks.

He suggested that factory committees might now provide the necessary organisations of a struggle for power.

However, the experience of July had convinced forces enjoying significant influence in the party’s central leadership that such a course would be sheer adventurism. Throughout September, the right wing either carried through, or urged initiatives that they hoped would secure the position of the Bolsheviks as the extreme left of a consolidated bourgeois democratic revolution—supporting participation, by turns, in the Stockholm “Peace” Conference, Kerensky’s Democratic Conference and the Pre-Parliament it gave birth to.

As Trotsky commented in *Lessons of October*:

The road to Stockholm was, in effect, the road to the Second International, just as taking part in the Pre-Parliament was the road to the bourgeois republic. ... The task of the Mensheviks and the SRs consisted in entangling the Bolsheviks in Soviet legality and afterwards painlessly transforming the latter into bourgeois parliamentary legality. The rights were ready to welcome this. ... Meanwhile, the Bolsheviks were already in the majority in the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets; our influence in the army grew, not from day to day, but from hour to hour. It was no longer a question of prognosis or perspective; it was literally a question of how we were to act the next day. [2]

In his lecture, Comrade Tom Carter explained there was growing support for the Bolsheviks in the factory committees in the aftermath of Kornilov’s attempted coup and the decisive role played by Bolshevik workers in opposing it. This also found reflection in the soviets, where the coup had forced the conciliationist-led soviets to defend themselves—and, in its aftermath, led to the Bolsheviks becoming the dominant force in the soviets themselves.

Lenin repeatedly urged that the party assume direct responsibility for the insurrection. He wrote, in a letter to the central committee on September 14: “The Bolsheviks, having obtained a majority in the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies of both capitals [Petersburg and Moscow], can and *must* take state power into their own hands.” [3]

Trotsky was fully in support of the Bolshevik-led insurrection advocated by Lenin. But he favoured carrying out the revolution in the name of the soviets.

With the Bolshevik position strengthening by the day, he argued that the slogan “All power to the Soviets!” must be maintained. His aim was to provide a transfer of power with the imprimatur of the widely-recognised

democratic organs of the workers, peasants and soldiers, to maximise support among those who would be reluctant to support the Bolsheviks.

Lenin relentlessly applied pressure on the Bolshevik Party leadership to carry out the overthrow of the Provisional Government.

Trotsky cited passages from Lenin's writings in *Lessons of October*.

The tendency opposed to "an immediate insurrection ... must be overcome." "Delay is criminal. To wait for the Congress of Soviets would be a childish game of formalities, a disgraceful game of formalities, and a betrayal of the revolution." The revolutionaries who delay, "risk losing everything."

Lenin's deeds matched his words.

Fearing that the procrastination of the party leadership would prove catastrophic and cede victory to the counterrevolution, he sought to galvanise the rank and file membership to both pressurise the party leaders and create facts on the ground.

He wrote to one of his closest confidantes, Ivar Smilga, on September 27 to discuss preparations for the uprising among the troops in Finland and the Baltic fleet. Two days later, in a letter to the central committee—which he took the precaution of sending to the Moscow and Petrograd committees of the party—he made the extraordinary declaration:

I am compelled to *tender my resignation from the Central Committee*, which I hereby do, reserving for myself freedom to campaign among the *rank and file* of the Party and at the Party Congress.

For it is my profound conviction that if we "wait" for the Congress of Soviets and let the present moment pass, we shall *ruin* the revolution. [4]

What determined Lenin's sense of urgency, so that a delay for a single day, let alone for weeks, could not be tolerated?

The situation in Russia he considered ripe for revolution. In July, when an uprising in St. Petersburg may have been supported in Moscow, but not the rest of the country, Lenin urged restraint. Now a peasant insurrection against the rich landowners was growing, creating the necessary conditions for the proletariat to win the backing of the agrarian masses.

Moreover, Lenin's political concern was not only with the Russian situation, but the fate of the world proletariat. He based his revolutionary perspective on international, and not merely Russian conditions. He made clear that he considered delay to be a potentially fatal blow to the European revolution he foresaw emerging in response to the horrors of war.

In letters, dated October 8, for the upcoming Congress of Northern Soviets on October 10, Lenin states:

Our revolution is passing through a highly critical period. This crisis coincides with the great crisis—the growth of the world socialist revolution and the struggle waged against it by world imperialism. A gigantic task is being presented to the responsible leaders of our Party, and failure to perform it will involve the danger of a complete collapse of the internationalist proletarian movement. The situation is such that, in truth, delay would be fatal. [5]

Pointing to the general strike in Turin, Italy and strikes by Czech workers, he states, of the mutiny aboard the battleship Prinzregent Luitpold and other ships by hundreds of sailors demanding an end to the war, that "a more impressive sign of the growth of revolution than a

revolt among the troops cannot be imagined. ... Yes, we shall be real traitors to the International if, at such a moment and under such favourable conditions, we respond to this call from the German revolutionaries with ... mere resolutions." [6]

The long struggle to reorient the party culminated in a central committee meeting on October 10. Lenin attended, arriving disguised. Thanks to the authority he wielded, he did not need to resign. His motion was passed by 10 votes to two.

Though no date was set for an uprising, the resolution was imbued with all the urgency Lenin could impart, and details the political basis on which the decision had been taken.

It begins with the international position of the Russian revolution, listing:

- The revolt in the German navy as an extreme manifestation of the growth throughout Europe of the world socialist revolution; the intention of the imperialists to strangle the revolution in Russia.

It then examines the situation in Russia:

- The decision of the Russian bourgeoisie and of the Provisional Government to surrender Petrograd to the Germans and to make plans for a second military coup; the securing of a Bolshevik majority in the Soviets; the peasant revolt.

The resolution concludes:

Considering therefore that an armed uprising is inevitable, and that the time for it is fully ripe, the Central Committee instructs all Party organisations to be guided accordingly, and to discuss and decide all practical questions (the Congress of Soviets of the Northern Region, the withdrawal of troops from Petrograd, the action of our people in Moscow and Minsk, etc.) from this point of view. [7]

This was a truly historic event. For the first time ever, a party representing the working class had not only set itself the general aim of replacing capitalism with socialism but had committed itself to making a revolution.

Trotsky notes, however, that even now there was concern and intense discussion as to when the revolution should be made and under what authority. He continued to argue that a date for insurrection should be a few days before the planned convening of the second Congress of Soviets, initially set for October 20, so that it could then be sanctioned by that body. And his position won out because it was correct.

Trotsky proved to be the master strategist of the insurrection, so that no less than Joseph Stalin himself wrote on the first anniversary of October:

All the work of practical organization of the insurrection was conducted under the immediate leadership of the chairman of the Petrograd Soviet, Trotsky. It is possible to declare with certainty that the swift passing of the garrison to the side of the Soviet and the bold execution of the work of the Military Revolutionary Committee, the party owes principally and above all to comrade Trotsky. [8]

Trotsky explains in *Lessons of October* that Lenin need not have feared that timing the insurrection to coincide with the upcoming second congress was an impermissible delay. To prepare the insurrection under this cover was politically of “inestimable advantage” to the Bolsheviks. And Trotsky was not delaying, but preparing:

From the moment when we, as the Petrograd Soviet, invalidated Kerensky’s order transferring two-thirds of the garrison to the front, we had actually entered a state of armed insurrection. Lenin, who was not in Petrograd, could not appraise the full significance of this fact. ... Yet, the outcome of the insurrection of October 25 was at least three-quarters settled, if not more, the moment that we opposed the transfer of the Petrograd garrison; created the Military Revolutionary Committee (October 16); appointed our own Commissars in all army divisions and institutions; and thereby completely isolated not only the General Staff of the Petrograd zone, but also the Government. [9]

In the next days, the threat to the insurrection’s success that Lenin feared from within the party leadership was to take the form of an open revolt.

Zinoviev and Kamenev remained resolutely against the insurrection, as expressed in their October 10 vote. Lenin requested another meeting of the Central Committee, which assembled on October 16. The October 10 resolution was endorsed by a majority of 20 votes to two, this time with four abstaining. Kamenev responded by resigning from the CC.

After their demand to express dissent in the Bolshevik press was denied, Kamenev, backed by Zinoviev, broke ranks and went to Maxim Gorky’s *Novaya Zhizn*. In its pages, on October 18, Kamenev publicly attacked plans for an insurrection that, for obvious reasons, had not been made public. He wrote, “We are most deeply convinced that to proclaim an armed uprising right now means to gamble not only the fate of our party but the fate of the Russian and international revolution as well.”

Against insurrection, Kamenev proposed patiently working to make it impossible for the bourgeoisie “to disrupt the Constituent Assembly” by using the Bolsheviks’ influence in the Soviets, the army and among the workers. Any attempt to disrupt the Constituent Assembly now “would again push the petty-bourgeois parties toward us. ... With the correct tactics we can win a third or even more of the seats in the Constituent Assembly.”

The situation was not ripe, he insisted. The workers and soldiers were for the Bolsheviks, but only due to pacifist, anti-war sentiment:

If we now take power alone and confront (as a result of the whole world situation) the necessity of waging revolutionary war, the mass of the soldiers will pour away from us ... And here we approach the second assertion—that the international proletariat is supposedly now already with us, in the majority. This unfortunately is not yet so. [10]

Were these fears without foundation? Of course not. The Bolsheviks confronted immense odds—and the situation they faced, even following the seizure of power, was an eruption of civil war and imperialist intervention.

But Kamenev and Zinoviev saw only disaster ahead, due to the apparent strength of reaction. In contrast, Lenin saw a situation pregnant with revolutionary opportunities—with the possibility of victory. Like that other great revolutionary, Abraham Lincoln, he had concluded: “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled

high with difficulty, ~~would~~ the occasion.” must rise

There is a key passage in *Lessons of October* dealing with the political psychology of Zinoviev and Kamenev, which stands as a sobering lesson to this day. Trotsky notes how their letter warns that the greatest danger would be to overestimate the strength of the revolutionary forces and to underestimate the forces of reaction. They wrote:

The forces of the enemy are greater than they appear. Petrograd will decide—but in Petrograd the enemies of the proletarian party have concentrated considerable forces: 5,000 Junkers [officer cadets], splendidly equipped and organized and, by virtue of their class position, eager and able to fight; and then the army headquarters; and then the shock troops; and then the Cossacks; and then a strong section of the garrison; and then there is a very strong section of the artillery deployed fanwise round Petrograd. [11]

Trotsky explains how this same standpoint led to the calling off of an insurrection by the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in 1923—of how a party leadership overwhelmed by the apparent strength of the counterrevolution completely underestimated the “effective forces of the German revolution”—the immensely powerful German proletariat:

Our Russian example is of great significance in this connection. Two weeks prior to our bloodless victory in Petrograd—and we could have gained it even two weeks earlier—experienced party politicians saw arrayed against us the Junkers, eager and able to fight, and the shock troops, and the Cossacks, and a strong section of the garrison and the artillery, deployed fanwise, and the troops arriving from the front. But in reality all this came to nothing; in round figures, zero. ... Here is the lesson which must be burned into the consciousness of every revolutionist! [12]

Zinoviev and Kamenev completely misread not only the balance of social forces arraigned in the revolutionary contest now posed. They also made a false estimation of the petty-bourgeois parties.

Lenin had rooted the development of opportunism and the eruption of social chauvinism in 1914, within the Second International, in the social relations made possible by imperialism: the ability of the ruling class to buy the loyalty of privileged petty-bourgeois strata, including the labour aristocracy, which functioned as the principal social base of the Second International.

Zinoviev and Kamenev calculated that the Mensheviks et al. would be driven toward the Bolsheviks and would help take forward the struggle to pressure the bourgeoisie to implement democratic measures. From his analysis, Lenin concluded that the self-same social democrats were “the real agents of the bourgeoisie in the working-class movement,” “the labour lieutenants of the capitalist class ... In the civil war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie they inevitably, and in no small numbers, take the side of the bourgeoisie, the ‘Versaillese’ against the ‘Communards’.” [13]

Lenin was furious at the disloyalty of Zinoviev and Kamenev, denouncing them as “strikebreakers” and “blacklegs” for their attack “in a paper which on this very question is *hand in glove with the bourgeoisie against the workers’ party!*” [14]

Rejecting the claim that the masses were not with the Bolsheviks, he declared:

[T]he most outstanding fact of present-day Russian life is *the revolt of the peasantry*. This shows objectively, not by words but by deeds, that the people are going over to the side of the Bolsheviks ... “In insurrection delay is fatal” this is our answer to those having the sad “courage” to look at the growing economic ruin, at the approaching famine, and still *dissuade* the workers from the uprising... [15]

On the day Kamenev’s attack was published, the delegates of the Petrograd military units met. They were split down the middle on staging an insurrection against the Provisional Government. And, confirming Trotsky’s position, they would only support it if it was conducted on behalf of the soviets.

Fortuitously, the non-Bolshevik parties took fright at the Bolsheviks’ growing influence and rescheduled the Congress of Soviets for October 25, to better mobilise their own supporters. Instead, this extra five days gave the Bolsheviks, and Trotsky, who was in overall charge, the necessary time to prepare and carry through the insurrection.

Thanks to the intense political and organisational preparation involved, this took place without serious loss of life.

The Soviet headquarters at the Smolny had been transformed into a fortress, guarded by machine guns and under the control of the Bolsheviks.

On the morning of October 24, the government closed down the central organ of the Bolshevik party and the paper of the Petrograd Soviet, and placed seals on the printing works.

A woman printer asked Trotsky, “Couldn’t we break the seals?” He replied, “Break them” and sent the Litovsky regiment and the Sixth Sapper Reserve Battalion to make sure this was done.

The telephone exchange was also liberated by a detachment of sailors, from military students who were intent on barring all Soviet communications.

That night, members of the Military Revolutionary Committee were despatched to all districts of the city.

The government had ordered the cruiser *Aurora* to steam out of the Neva, but the Bolshevik sailors were loyal to the Military Revolutionary Committee and stayed put.

Trotsky hears reports of a detachment of artillery, a battalion of shock troops and student-officers from the Peterhof military school, and the Women’s Battalion, being mobilised by Kerensky and the Provisional Government. He orders military defences to be placed on all approaches to the city.

As things turn out, the streets belong to the Bolsheviks and few respond to Kerensky’s orders, except some of the military students. Armed Bolshevik-led detachments take control of one institution after another and all the most important points in Petrograd.

The next morning, October 25, the government is still in session at the Winter Palace, but the weakly-guarded palace has been surrounded. At one o’clock, Trotsky makes a public statement:

On behalf of the Military-Revolutionary Committee, I declare that the Provisional government is no longer existent. Some ministers have been arrested. Others will be arrested in the course of a few days or hours. ... The Winter Palace has not yet been taken, but its fate will be decided during the next few minutes. [16]

The palace is taken without a fight.

As Trotsky states, thanks to the preparatory work of the Military Revolutionary Committee, “The insurrection of October 25 was only supplementary in character. This is precisely why it was painless.”

Perhaps the best description of what had been achieved, and the most famous, was when Trotsky replied to the Menshevik leader Fyodor Dan at that evening’s session of the Congress of Soviets.

In answer to Dan’s railing against conspirators and insistence that the Bolsheviks form a coalition with the Socialist Revolutionists and the Mensheviks, Trotsky replied:

What has taken place is an uprising, not a conspiracy. An uprising of the masses of the people needs no justification. We have been strengthening the revolutionary energy of the workers and soldiers. We have been forging, openly, the will of the masses for an uprising. Our uprising has won. And now we are being asked to give up our victory, to come to an agreement. With whom? You are wretched, disunited individuals; you are bankrupts; your part is over. Go to the place where you belong from now on—the dust-bin of history! [17]

Even after the seizure of power, on November 4, four Central Committee members, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Rykov and Nogin, resigned from both the central committee and from the Council of People’s Commissars, along with two others. They demanded the formation of a coalition government composed of all soviet parties in a new Constituent Assembly, while denouncing the “ruinous policy” of Lenin and Trotsky.

Those hearing this lecture can imagine how Trotsky’s opponents responded to his raising these historical issues in his *Lessons of October*, when it was published in October 1924.

His essay was written as the introduction to a two-volume collection of Trotsky’s writings on year one of the Russian revolution, titled, “1917”—part of a project to publish his collected works. Its 60-plus pages examine the essential role played by the vanguard Marxist party in the imperialist epoch of wars and social revolution.

It is one of the most important and illuminating pamphlets ever written.

Proceeding from a concrete depiction of the struggle waged by the Bolshevik Party to mobilise the working class for the seizure of power, it details the most fundamental political requirements for waging a successful revolutionary struggle against capitalism.

Lessons of October was published in the aftermath of the abortive revolutionary events in Bulgaria and, more importantly, in Germany the previous year—in which the policies pursued by the Comintern and its affiliated Communist Parties proved disastrous.

In Bulgaria, a June 9 coup d’état deposed the government of the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union, headed by the peasant leader Aleksandar Stamboliyski, and put Aleksandar Tsankov, the pre-war leader of Bulgarian fascism, in power.

The coup was opposed by activists of the Agrarian National Union and individual communist volunteers in the June Uprising, but was crushed due to the abstention of the Bulgarian Communist Party—which declared the coup to be a “struggle for power between the urban and rural bourgeoisie.”

The Comintern belatedly, in August, urged the Bulgarian Communist Party to stage an uprising just one month later! No time was given to mobilise the workers and agrarian masses, and the military government began a programme of mass arrests of CP members. The Communist Party nevertheless carried out the Comintern’s instructions, staging an uprising on September 23 that was put down with great ruthlessness.

Trotsky wrote of this disaster:

All sympathies shifted Leftward and were transferred to the Communist Party. The enemy’s armed forces were infinitesimal. And yet we were beaten. What was lacking was a clear, distinct plan

of action and a decisive blow at an appointed moment and at an appointed place. ... This is essentially a military-revolutionary task. For this the enemy has to be thrown on his back, the initiative has to be taken from him, power has to be wrested from him. [18]

Of greater import still was Germany.

Revolution in Germany was the key to the success of the European and world revolution, and with it the survival of the Soviet Union. The most economically developed bourgeois power in Europe was constrained by the terms of the Versailles Treaty to make reparations to the victorious Allied powers of World War I. The German imperialists refused to continue doing so, to which France responded in January by occupying the Ruhr.

Germany's rulers printed massive amounts of money to pay for a policy of resistance, leading to hyperinflation and heightening class tensions.

With the French occupation of the Ruhr, a far reaching economic and political crisis ensued. This led to a dramatic growth of the Communist Party, which had the support of millions of workers.

The issue of social revolution was posed point blank. However, instead of pursuing a revolutionary policy, the KPD was rent with divisions over whether the time was ripe to take power. The party had formed an alliance with left Social Democrats in Saxony and Thuringia. And when the party leadership finally set the date for an insurrection, its leader, Heinrich Brandler, called off the uprising because it did not have the support of the left Social Democrats.

The decision was taken at a congress of factory councils in Chemnitz, Saxony on October 21. This congress was supposed to call a general strike and give the signal for the insurrection. A majority of the delegates would have supported the call for a general strike, as Brandler admitted in a letter to Clara Zetkin. But, he explained:

During the Chemnitz conference I realised that we could under no circumstances enter the decisive struggle, once we had not been able to convince the left SPD to sign the decision for a general strike... Against massive resistance I altered course and prevented us, the Communists, from entering the struggle on our own. [19]

The decision to cancel the revolution did not reach Hamburg in time. An insurrection was organised, but it remained isolated and was defeated bloodily within three days.

The response of the Comintern was to blame the entire affair on Brandler. But ultimate political responsibility for this disaster lay with the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and of the Comintern—in the front rank, the head of the Comintern, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin, who were then in a factional struggle against Trotsky.

Trotsky had agitated for the German party to lead an insurrection, as the Bolsheviks had in October 1917—and in weeks, not months. In a speech to the Red Army and Red Navy on October 21, the very day Brandler called off the planned insurrection, Trotsky declared, “In order to ensure military success for a revolution one needs to want to achieve this success at any price, and actively to strive for it, breaking down all the obstacles in one's path.” [20]

In contrast, Stalin had urged restraint—stressing that the workers still had confidence in the Social Democrats, and even asserting that “For us it would be an advantage if the fascists strike first.” [21]

Trotsky had been in an alliance with, by now, a desperately ill Lenin since 1922 against Stalin's Russian nationalist politics. It was a conflict that ended with Lenin urging Stalin's removal as General Secretary.

Trotsky had formed the Left Opposition in 1923.

Lessons of October was politically devastating for his opponents, but it was not simply a polemical retort. Trotsky's concern was with the fate of the world socialist revolution, nothing less. In the first chapter, “We must study the Russian Revolution,” Trotsky insists:

[F]or the study of the laws and methods of proletarian revolution there is, up to the present time, no more important and profound a source than our October experience. Leaders of European Communist parties who fail to assimilate the history of October by means of a critical and closely detailed study, would resemble a commander-in-chief who, in preparation for new wars under modern conditions, fails to study the strategic, tactical and technical experience of the last imperialist war. Such a commander-in-chief would inevitably doom his armies to defeat in the future. [22]

Trotsky explained how “we witnessed in Germany a classic demonstration of how it is possible to miss a perfectly exceptional revolutionary situation of world-historic importance.” [23]

He opposed the errors of the Comintern by contrasting them with the approach taken by the Bolshevik Party under Lenin in 1917. In so doing, he exposed the reality behind the claims of his opponents that the Bolshevik party had acted throughout 1917 as a monolithic entity—in which only the upstart and interloper Trotsky was an alien tendency.

Trotsky raised the uncomfortable truth that Lenin had fought for the October insurrection in the face of determined and open opposition from Zinoviev and Kamenev—and a constantly vacillating position from Stalin.

Moreover, he placed central emphasis on the fact that this opposition to the October insurrection was rooted in hostility to Lenin's April Theses.

Lenin's agreement with Trotsky's appraisal of the socialist character of the coming revolution began months of inner party struggle against the future “Triumvirate”—beginning with their support for the bourgeois Provisional Government and political adaptation to defencist justifications for continuing the war.

Still, Trotsky made clear in his introduction:

The disagreements of 1917 were indeed very profound, and they were not by any means accidental. But nothing could be more paltry than an attempt to turn them now, after a lapse of several years, into weapons of attack against those who were at that time mistaken. [24]

Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin felt no such compunction. In a marker for the future, they railed against “Trotskyism.” They accused Trotsky of minimising the role of Lenin, of revising Leninism, and of having published the volume *1917* behind the backs of the Central Committee. Zinoviev went so far as to demand his expulsion from the party, so that Trotsky felt compelled to resign as People's Commissar of Army and Fleet Affairs and Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council.

The pattern was set in which Trotsky's every effort to politically reorient the CPSU and the Communist International met with ferocious and unprincipled opposition.

The necessarily brief historical narrative I have provided I hope helps to better understand the political basis of the universal conclusions Trotsky drew from the October events.

The most fundamental passages from *Lessons of October* repeatedly focus on the essential role of the party in the socialist revolution. Trotsky insists:

Without a party, apart from a party, over the head of a party, or with a substitute for a party, the proletarian revolution cannot conquer. That is the principal lesson of the past decade. [25]

He writes in his introduction:

[E]vents have proved that without a party capable of directing the proletarian revolution, the revolution itself is rendered impossible. The proletariat cannot seize power by a spontaneous uprising. ... One propertied class is able to seize the power that has been wrested from another propertied class because it is able to base itself upon its riches, its cultural level, and its innumerable connections with the old state apparatus. But there is nothing else that can serve the proletariat as a substitute for its own party. [26]

Trotsky then turns his attention to the significance of the inner party struggle, as it develops in the course of preparing a revolution. He rejects all purely subjective explanations of such disputes, insisting that the struggle between political tendencies and fractions articulates opposed social interests, either of classes or fractions of classes.

In the cauldron of revolution, when class conflicts have reached a peak intensity and bear down on the party and its cadre, factional disputes were inevitable. He wrote:

The fundamental instrument of proletarian revolution is the party. On the basis of our experience—even taking only one year, from February 1917 to February 1918—and on the basis of the supplementary experience in Finland, Hungary, Italy, Bulgaria and Germany, we can posit as almost an unalterable law that a party crisis is inevitable in the transition from the preparatory revolutionary activity to the immediate struggle for power. [27]

Explaining why this is so, he continues:

[E]very period in the development of the party has special features of its own and calls for specific habits and methods of work. A tactical turn implies a greater or lesser break in these habits and methods. Herein lies the direct and most immediate root of internal party friction and crises. ... Hence the danger arises that if the turn is too abrupt or too sudden, and if in the preceding period too many elements of inertia and conservatism have accumulated in the leading organs of the party, then the party proves itself unable to fulfil its leadership at that supreme and critical moment for which it has been preparing itself in the course of years or decades. The party is ravaged by a crisis, and the movement passes the party by—and heads towards defeat. [28]

Summing up these dangers he warns:

To put the case more plainly: the party which does not keep step with the historical tasks of its own class becomes, or runs the risk of becoming, the indirect tool of other classes. [29]

No turn is more fundamental than the preparation to seize power. Trotsky defines this as a strategic, rather than tactical turn, making the essential point that the necessity for such a distinction is itself the political product of the imperialist epoch of wars and revolutions.

Prior to the First World War, the task of making an insurrection, of taking power, never presented itself to the parties of the Second International—other than for the Russian Social Democrats in 1905.

The 1905 revolution gave the Russian Marxists a major advantage, in that it prompted an intense discussion on revolutionary strategy. Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, insisting that the solution of the democratic and national tasks in countries like Russia, with a belated capitalist development, was only possible through the working class coming to power in a socialist revolution, was its supreme product.

In contrast, the prevailing intellectual atmosphere in the Second International continued to be dominated by the application of parliamentary tactics, trade union tactics, municipal tactics, cooperative tactics, etc. Karl Kautsky summarised this outlook, in an article published in *Neue Zeit* in December 1893:

The Socialist party is a revolutionary party, but not a revolution-making party. We know that our goal can be attained only through a revolution. We also know that it is just as little in our power to create this revolution as it is in the power of our opponents to prevent it. It is no part of our work to instigate a revolution or to prepare the way for it. [30]

The quote finishes with the statement:

Since we know nothing concerning the decisive battles of the social war, we are manifestly unable to say whether they will be bloody or not, whether physical force will play a decisive part, or whether they will be fought exclusively by means of economic, legislative and moral pressure. [31]

It must be stressed that no Marxist would have disagreed with Kautsky's formulation at that time. The German Social Democracy, the most powerful in the Second International, was working under conditions of general capitalist expansion and, indeed, could not conjure up a revolutionary movement of the proletariat.

But this objective situation, over time, had its political impact. As Trotsky explained in *The War and the International*,

Theoretically the German labour movement marched under the banner of Marxism. Still in its dependence on the conditions of the period, Marxism became for the German proletariat not the algebraic formula of the revolution that it was at the beginning, but the theoretic method for adaptation to a national-capitalist state crowned with the Prussian helmet...

In forty-five years history did not offer the German proletariat a single opportunity to remove an obstacle by a stormy attack, or to capture any hostile position in a revolutionary advance. As a result of the mutual relation of social forces, it was constrained to avoid obstacles or adapt itself to them. In this, Marxism as a theory was a valuable tool for political guidance, but it could not change the opportunist character of the class movement, which in essence was at that time alike in England, France and Germany. [32]

With the outbreak of war, what proved decisive was not the official Marxist ideology of the parties of the Second International, but the reformist character of their practice, and the political opportunism and integration into the bourgeois order that this engendered.

The Bolsheviks, whose history was one of constant struggle against opportunism, was the most revolutionary party the world had yet seen. As Trotsky explains:

The traditions of the heroic struggle against the Tsarist monarchy; the habituation to revolutionary self-sacrifice, bound up with the conditions of underground activity; the broad theoretical study and assimilation of the revolutionary experience of mankind; the struggle against Menshevism, against the Narodniks, and against Conciliationism; the supreme experience of the 1905 revolution; the theoretical study and assimilation of this experience during the years of counterrevolution; the examination of the problems of the international labour movement in the light of the revolutionary lessons of 1905—these were the things which in their totality gave our party an exceptional revolutionary temper, supreme theoretical penetration, and unparalleled revolutionary sweep. [33]

However, even in this party, opposition to insurrection was strong. It gave rise to a conflict between a proletarian tendency, striving toward world revolution, and a petty-bourgeois tendency, whose politics led to the subordination of the proletariat to the bourgeois order.

Such inner party conflicts were not accidental, but inevitable, both then and in subsequent revolutionary situations:

If by Bolshevism—and we are stressing here its essential aspect—we understand such a training, such a tempering, and such an organization of the proletarian vanguard as enables the latter to seize power, arms in hand; and if by Social Democracy we are to understand the acceptance of a reformist opposition activity within the framework of bourgeois society and an adaptation to its legality—i.e., the actual training of the masses to become imbued with the inviolability of the bourgeois state; then, indeed, it is absolutely clear that even within the Communist party itself, which does not emerge full-fledged from the crucible of history, the struggle between social-democratic tendencies and Bolshevism is bound to reveal itself in its most clear, open and uncamouflaged form during the immediate revolutionary period when the question of power is posed point-blank. [34]

The final issue I want to stress is how Trotsky appraised the role of Lenin in the revolution. Yes, he disagreed with Lenin over the tactical efficacy of waging the insurrectionary struggle under the banner of the party or the soviets. But no one was more supremely aware of the vital historical role Lenin played in driving forward the party leadership on the path of insurrection:

He asks rhetorically:

Is it really true that such a historic event can hinge upon an interval of 24 hours? Yes, it can. ... Had not Lenin sounded the alarm, had not there been all this pressure and criticism on his part, had it not been for his intense and passionate revolutionary mistrust, the party would have probably failed to align its front at the decisive moment, for the opposition among the party tops was very strong, and the staff plays

a major role in all wars, including civil wars. [35]

Summing up the political task facing the Communist International, he concludes with a passage both concise and profound:

What is the Bolshevization of the Communist parties? It is giving them such a training, and effecting such a selection of the leading staff as would prevent them from “drifting” when the hour for their October strikes. “That is the whole of Hegel, and the wisdom of books, and the meaning of all philosophy ...” [36]

A key passage from Trotsky’s biography of Stalin addresses the relationship between a leader of genius, like Lenin, and the revolutionary party.

Superficially, there appears to be a contradiction between the stress placed on the role of Lenin as a leader of genius and the vital role of the vanguard party in the revolution. But this is only the case if the relationship between the two is not properly understood.

Trotsky asks:

But by what miracle did Lenin manage in a few short weeks to turn the Party’s course into a new channel? The answer should be sought simultaneously in two directions—Lenin’s personal attributes and the objective situation. Lenin was strong not only because he understood the laws of the class struggle but also because his ear was faultlessly attuned to the stirrings of the masses in motion. He represented not so much the Party machine as the vanguard of the proletariat. ... Lenin exerted influence not so much as an individual but because he embodied the influence of the class on the Party and of the Party on its machine. [37]

He continues by asking, “Does it mean then that in the Bolshevik Party Lenin was everything and all the others nothing?” He rejects such an appraisal:

Geniuses do not create science out of themselves; they merely accelerate the process of collective thinking. The Bolshevik Party had a leader of genius. That was no accident. A revolutionist of Lenin’s makeup and breadth could be the leader only of the most fearless party, capable of carrying its thoughts and actions to their logical conclusion. ... Without the Party Lenin would have been as helpless as Newton and Darwin without collective scientific work. [38]

Lenin remarked in the heat of revolutionary events that once Trotsky had understood that there could be no organisational unity with the Mensheviks, there had been “No better Bolshevik.”

Lessons of October must be understood as the intellectual product of Trotsky’s assimilation of the essence of Bolshevism.

In 1982, David North wrote four essays under the collective title, *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*.

North writes the following:

Based on the concrete historical experience of the working class in

Russia and on an international scale, Trotsky elaborated the conception that the fate of the socialist revolution for a number of years—and even for decades—can hinge on the decisions made by the leadership of a Marxist party in the course of a few days.

The concept of *cadre training* and of the role of the International was invested with a new historical content. ... The historic task of the Comintern was to train an international cadre in the leadership of its sections capable of fulfilling this task. [39]

To prepare for the revolution and to ensure its success means developing the party cadre, and above all its leaders, as Marxists, to give “such a training, and effecting such a selection of the leading staff, as would prevent them from drifting when the hour for their October strikes,” as Trotsky wrote in *Lessons of October*.

This is what is meant by the concept Trotsky developed of the party as a “school of revolutionary strategy,” why he says that preparing for the next October is “the whole of Hegel, and the wisdom of books, and the meaning of all philosophy,” and why he insists, “[W]ithout a penetrating, resolute and courageous party leadership, the victory of the proletarian revolution is impossible.”

Today the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the World Socialist Web Site are alone in taking seriously Trotsky’s insistence on studying the lessons of the October Revolution.

The October Revolution is the most seminal event in world history. For the first time ever, the working class overthrew the bourgeois order and took the first heroic step on the road to world socialist revolution.

The terrible events that overtook the revolution—its bureaucratic degeneration under Stalin, the terrible crimes perpetrated, cannot be allowed to obscure this historic achievement, nor prevent the working class learning all that can be learned from it.

Those who have listened to this lecture series will recognise how the issues dealt with by Trotsky—the struggle against war and defencism, the theory of permanent revolution and Lenin’s April Theses, the July days, the preparations for October, and so on—have been the essential subject matter of our own presentations.

It is by such means—the political education of the best and most farsighted elements of the working class and youth—that we are preparing the path for the socialist revolution.

Trotsky wrote in the *Transitional Programme*, the founding document of the Fourth International:

All talk to the effect that historical conditions have not yet “ripened” for socialism is the product of ignorance or conscious deception. The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only “ripened”; they have begun to get somewhat rotten. Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. The turn is now to the proletariat, i.e., chiefly to its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership. [40]

Resolving this crisis means joining and building the ICFI. In its ranks, the advanced workers and youth will be steeled as the revolutionary political leadership that is so urgently required, as world capitalism descends into a new period of wars and of revolutions.

Notes:

An online edition of *Lessons of October* can be found on the World Socialist Web Site here. Mehring Books also offers both Kindle and ePub versions.

[1] David North, “Why Study The Russian Revolution?,” *Why Study The Russian Revolution?* Vol. 1 (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 2017), pp. 20–21.

[2] Leon Trotsky, *Lessons of October* (London: New Park Publications, 1971), pp. 28–29.

[3] V.I. Lenin, “The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 26 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), p. 19.

[4] Lenin, “The Crisis has Matured,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 26, p. 84.

[5] *Ibid.*, “Letter to the Bolshevik Comrades Attending the Congress of Soviets of the Northern Region” p. 182.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 182–83.

[7] *Ibid.*, “Meeting of the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P. (B.) October 10 (23), 1917,” p. 190.

[8] Joseph Stalin, “The Role of the Most Eminent Party Leaders,” *Pravda*, November 1918, cited in Leon Trotsky, *The Stalin School of Falsification* (London: New Park Publications, 1974), p. 10.

[9] Trotsky, *Lessons of October*, p. 50.

[10] All above quotes: Grigorii Zinoviev, [with Lev Kamanev] “Statement to the Principal Bolshevik Party Organizations,” October 11 (24), 1917, cited in and translated by Robert V. Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), p. 56.

[11] Trotsky, *Lessons of October*, p. 36.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

[13] V.I. Lenin, “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 22 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), p. 194.

[14] Lenin, “Letter to Bolshevik Party Comrades,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 26, p. 217.

[15] Lenin, “Letter to Comrades,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 26, p. 197; 206–07.

[16] Leon Trotsky, *My Life*, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), pp. 326–27.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 328.

[18] Leon Trotsky, *Military Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 5 (London: New Park Publications, 1981), pp. 224–25.

[19] Cited in Peter Schwarz, “The German October: The missed revolution of 1923, Part 2,” Accessed at: <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2008/10/1923-o31.html>

[20] Trotsky, *Military Writings*, Vol. 5, p. 233.

[21] Cited in Schwarz, accessed at: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2008/10/1923-o31.html>

[22] Trotsky, *Lessons of October*, p. 4.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 4–5.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 6

[30] Karl Kautsky, *The Road to Power*, (New York: Prism Key Press, 2013), pp. 47–48.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

[32] Trotsky, *The War and the International*, (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 2017), pp. 65–66.

[33] Trotsky, *Lessons of October*, p. 61.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

[37] Trotsky, *Stalin*, (London: Wellred Books, 2016), p. 258.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 259–60.

[39] David North, *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*, (Oak Park, MI: Socialist Equality Party, 2013), pp. 29–30.

[40] Leon Trotsky, "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International," *The Transitional Program* (New York: Labor Publications, 1972), p. 8.

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